

Modern study of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily

Article

Published Version

Matthew, D. (1992) Modern study of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. *Reading Medieval Studies*, XVIII. pp. 33-56. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84215/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Modern Study of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily

Donald Matthew
University of Reading

The title may look straight-forward, yet almost every part of it needs some elucidation. First, let it be understood that it would not be possible in a narrow compass such as this to survey, summarise or sum up the amazing quantity of modern, even of recent, historical work on the Norman kingdom. Instead I propose only to focus attention on the somewhat surprising fact that scholarly enthusiasm for the Norman kingdom is, in historical terms, comparatively recent and of rather a special kind. Since there are many languages in which studies about it are published, and few scholars can be confident of having read most of it, it seemed better to concentrate on works written in English. This is not such a limitation as it might at first appear, as will become apparent, but, even if it were, it is not unreasonable to assume that English works are better known here than foreign ones. There is now a long-standing tradition of considering the two Norman kingdoms of England and Sicily as not only comparable, but outstanding in twelfth-century terms. English writers familiar with the Normans in England have therefore some advantage when dealing with the southern kingdom, even over French and German historians, who have understandably tended to take the view that the French and German twelfth-century monarchies are problems rather than models. My own attention was drawn originally to the study of the Sicilian monarchy because it seemed an obvious way to improve my understanding of the Normans. My experience of what it has meant to turn from the study of one Norman kingdom to that of the other lies at the heart of this present discussion.

The kingdom of Sicily was created for Roger II in 1130. After his death in 1154, it was ruled by his son and grandsons until 1194 when it was obtained by the German emperor, Henry VI, the husband of Roger's posthumous daughter Constance. Although Henry died less

than three years later and the government then passed back to Roger's kin, namely Constance and her son Frederick II, historians have been inclined to regard the period after 1194 as belonging to another phase of the kingdom's history. The Norman kingdom of Sicily has therefore come to be a term of historical art meaning the period 1130-1194. Likewise artificial is the term Sicily in the title. Sicily itself constituted only about one quarter of the kingdom's total territory. In the Norman period the kings actually used a composite title, king of Sicily, of the duchy of Apulia and of the principality of Capua, an awkward phrase the meaning of which is not altogether clear, but the kings showed no eagerness to abandon it. It was Frederick II who began to use the simpler form when he first went to Germany, perhaps to save trouble in explaining the older formula in a foreign land. As for 'Norman' kingdom, this is a matter of using a convenient historical label. Roger II was Norman in the sense that his father, Count Roger I, had been born in Normandy, but Roger had left his homeland as a young man some forty years before Roger II's birth and died when the future king was a mere child. Roger II's mother, Adelaide, who certainly therefore had a stronger personal influence on him, came from north Italy and her kinsmen were prominent in Sicily in Roger's early years. Nevertheless Roger was proud of his Norman ancestry, of his distinguished father and his still more famous uncle, Robert Guiscard, duke of Apulia. He knew that his kingdom had only been made possible by the Normans who, in the eleventh century, had overthrown all earlier political authorities in south Italy and Sicily, and taken their place. By obtaining recognition of his lordship from the leading rulers of his day, nearly all of them descendants of those Norman conquerors, Roger II in effect united their lands into one great lordship, which was duly recognised as a monarchy by the pope in 1130. The term Norman is sometimes challenged as inappropriate for the kingdom, but it does embody an important truth. Without those earlier Norman conquests there could have been no kingdom. As long as Norman is not understood to imply more than this, the term is useful.

However, the tendency to think of the kingdoms of England and Sicily together and to recognise common Norman features in them has invested the term with deeper significance, so much so, that Norman-ness has become crucial. Suppose by chance Roger II had had no Norman connections at all, but had nevertheless created an effective monarchy, with the institutions we know of. Would historians still

have been tempted to make so much of parallel features in it to those that they observe in England? Is it not rather because both are thought 'Norman' that any similarities seem significant? This is particularly important in England, where the Normans are usually understood to have been a masterful race with pronounced national characteristics of their own. Moreover, they are held to have had real political gifts. It is still traditional, despite some recent scholarly impatience with the idea, to think that the continuous history of the government of the English state can be traced back to the Norman conquest. Some will go further back than this, but everyone's history of England will go at least as far back as Hastings, the one date of English history universally known. Love them or hate them, the Normans left their mark on institutions, culture and folklore. The authority of Norman rulers in this country is generally thought to have been total. Because of this, as recent historians have been demonstrating, it was they who drew the outlines of modern government, by new arrangements for financial management, for law, and above all in the development of centralised administration, the English historian's obsession. As commonly presented in almost any book consulted by the curious English student, the Norman monarchy of Sicily is likewise seen as an authoritative, centralising monarchy with a precocious administrative machine at its disposal. A very recent example is the first chapter of David Abulafia's book *Frederick II* published in 1988, where he summarises what he calls the emperor's Norman inheritance. Although he deliberately sets out to revise some commonly held beliefs about the monarchy and the culture of the kingdom, he has no hesitation about talking of 'Norman ideas of monarchy' and of the Sicilian monarchy's 'highly developed absolutist ideas', and its 'elaborate bureaucracy'. When he attempts to describe the other side of this coin it is to present 'a kingdom bled dry by relentless financial exactions', because the 'bureaucracy served the interests of the crown far better than that of the crown's subjects'. Whatever he says about the darker side of this government, he is quite confident that the Normans were state-builders on an impressive scale.¹

Whereas the role of the Normans in England has been recognised almost from the very first and continuously, if not always with approval, ever since, there has not been in Sicily a comparable continuous interest in the Norman achievements there. The reasons for this are both various and obvious. The modern Italian state does not look back to the Norman kingdom of Italy as its medieval progenitor,

for its oldest public records, or for the origin of its nobility and its exchequer, or sentimentally for the equivalent of Windsor castle or the New Forest. In as much as the Norman kingdom had a modern heir in Italy at all, it was the Bourbon monarchy of the Two Sicilies. This not only delayed Italian unification, but was itself far from being an effective modernised state and it became a byword for corruption and incompetence. After Gladstone's private visit to Naples in 1850-51 he was moved to write a letter to the prime-minister Lord Aberdeen about the royal government's treatment of political prisoners which he pronounced 'an outrage upon religion, upon civilisation, upon humanity and upon decency ... it is not mere imperfection, not corruption in low quarters, not occasional severity ... it is incessant, systematic, deliberate violation of the law, by the Power appointed to watch over and maintain it'.² Gladstone gives no impression of having ever heard that this vile kingdom might be the degenerate heir of a once great Norman state; England's equal. It would indeed have actually seemed improbable that one of the very worst governments of Europe in the nineteenth century had begun as one of the most effective in the middle ages. Before 1860 the kingdom was identified with the forces of repression and the stifling of civic liberty. Modern Italians would still never dream of linking their modern state with the medieval past in the way that Englishmen take for granted. Irrespective of what we make of the Norman kingdom in the south, it is understandable that it will never become central to the study of history in modern Italy, as the Norman kingdom of England has so obviously become to medieval studies here. The Norman kingdom is studied in Italy as part of the local history of the south and of Sicily, regions that are still thought of as some of the poorest, most backward and indeed most corrupt in western Europe. For this reason it ought at the very least to seem disconcerting when the Norman kingdom of the south is described in enthusiastic terms in modern books. If it were indeed once so great, the most important problem about its history would be to explain, as with Spain, how it had faltered and failed, for no greater tragedy could surely be imagined. In this connection it is truly remarkable that so little has been written in English about its subsequent history.³ The Norman kingdom zooms into view like a brilliant firework and splutters out, provoking no wonder at all at its disappearance. There is no particular reason perhaps why writers and readers of English books about the Norman kingdom of Sicily should bother themselves with problems of this kind. I am not pretending

that they ought to do so as a matter of duty, but the limits of their interests are noteworthy. If we became aware of foreign authors regularly selecting a chunk of English history, such as the Civil War, and not bothering with what came before or after, I think we would likely feel entitled to point out the importance of studying problems in their proper context. We might also, as Englishmen, I think, rather wonder at, even resent, perhaps, foreigners meddling with our history and wondering about their motives for doing so. Italians naturally take more kindly than we do to foreign interest in their affairs. South Italians positively seem to welcome the international attention that has been given to the Norman monarchy. This not only effaces any impression of parochialism that might otherwise be created by their own efforts; in some ways it also shows that the history of their twelfth-century kingdom generates a comparable degree of international enthusiasm as the much vaunted achievements of northern Italians, like the communes, the Renaissance, or the Risorgimento. The history of the south has not been a happy one for many centuries, and it is understandable why south Italians should make the most of the twelfth century when their region enjoyed international acclaim.

The Italian welcome for international attention is one thing, but the motives for foreign interest have still to be explored: the English are not the only foreigners to have written about the Normans in the south. The writing of medieval history depends on access to the sources of information and the ability of scholars to give them long and careful study. This means that until the nineteenth century historical scholarship was normally undertaken by local historians where the archives were themselves located. Only through the great publications of sources, Ughelli's *Italia Sacra*, Pirri's *Sicilia Sacra* and Muratori's *Rerum Scriptores Italarum*,⁴ which had a wide diffusion in Europe, did it become possible for historians, like Gibbon for example, to write about the history of south Italy without needing to travel there. Later, with better facilities for travelling in the nineteenth century historians began to undertake systematic searches for unpublished materials in the libraries and archives of Europe. Large numbers of German and French scholars in particular came south, initially to extend knowledge of their own countries' histories and their impact in Italy. Until then foreign interest in the south had really been focused on the famous sites of ancient history like Syracuse, or the great ruins, Pompei, Paestum, and the other Greek temples of Sicily.⁵ Travelling was itself difficult, inns non-existent or painfully

uncomfortable. In Sicily, it was common for visitors to hire a boat and move on from place to place round the coast, trying to avoid travel overland, except for such important excursions as the visit to the crater of Mount Etna. By land, they usually had to travel with a military escort to protect them from brigands.

These visitors generally showed no interest in the Norman past or antiquities, even if they knew about them. Baron Riedesel who described his Sicilian journey of 1767 saw and admired the beautiful porphyry tombs of the kings of Sicily in Palermo.⁶ His attitude to the Normans is shown by his opinion that the tombs were much too fine for the times of the kings that are buried in them. At Monreale he saw other beautiful ancient porphyry tombs where kings William I and II, were buried. This moved him to say of these Norman kings: 'William the Good got this name because he was bigoted and entirely devoted to the clergy; the other had the surname of Bad for being wiser and free from prejudices ...'. Of the cathedral's now famous decoration he says: 'I shall say nothing of the Gothic mosaic which the Sicilians admire very much.' How limited the interests and knowledge of foreigners in Sicily could be is also shown by a translation of an earlier French work on Sicily made into English in 1784 which summarised its medieval history in a few words as follows: 'The Saracens invaded and took the whole island A.D. 914. They were afterwards overpowered by the Normans, to whom a multitude of Germans succeeded. Pope Clement the Seventh deprived the Germans of it and favoured the French under Charles duke of Anjou.' In this work, Charles of Anjou is even said to have been responsible for founding the abbey of Monreale in honour of his brother St Louis.⁷

Not all southern travellers were as ignorant or prejudiced and little by little travellers got to know local history better and took a broader interest in its monuments. Of particular value to English visitors and students was a book written by H. Gally Knight which gave a description of the Norman buildings of Sicily he had studied during his six week tour in 1836.⁸ He had undertaken this, as he explains, to complete his survey of Norman works in 'the third scene of their conquest and dominion': it was a sequel to his previous works on the Norman architecture of Normandy and England. This study is preceded by a brief sensible history of the Normans in the south from the early eleventh century to 1266, based largely on the sources then in print. Subsequent English travellers, enlightened by Knight, were also affected by the romanticism of the new age. They began to appreciate

what they perceived as 'the exoticism of Norman Sicily, the peculiarity of Norman architecture, unlike anything elsewhere existing in which the Byzantine and Saracenic styles are so curiously intermingled.' At Monreale, a visitor of 1853 commented that 'when the immense bronze doors were suddenly thrown open, the effect of the interior covered with gold and mosaic and sunk in a rich half light is indescribably gorgeous'.⁹ By mid-century, Norman Sicily had already begun to enchant English travellers. Even so, the traveller's books of the late nineteenth century show that the English had still not then formulated any ideas about the nature and character of Norman government in the southern kingdom. Augustus Hare, whose 500 pages on the Cities of Southern Italy and Sicily were published in 1883, quoted extensively from earlier works of reference, including translations from the French and German. The character of the book indicates that the region was still little known and visited only with some difficulty, despite the new availability of railways. In his summary of Sicilian history, he claims that with the eleventh century began the 'most interesting period of Sicilian history', but even so he accords it less than four pages.¹⁰ It is a mere account of the events of the reigns of kings and no attempt is made to sum up their collective achievements or see in them the foundation of a powerful new kingdom. Of Roger II, for example, he says that he 'consolidated his father's conquests by his wise, temperate and unselfish rule, founded admirable laws, derived from a careful study of the legal system in other countries, and devoted fifteen years to a treatise on universal geography drawn up by Edrisi. At his death, he was esteemed the wisest, most renowned, wealthy and fortunate prince of his time.' A hundred years ago Victorians certainly had a good idea of what the Norman conquest had brought to England, but they showed no inclination to believe that comparable advantages had flowed from the Norman conquest of the south.

The purpose of quoting from these travellers is not to pass them off as serious historians but to call attention to the commonplaces of the time. There is no obvious desire to establish any link between the two Norman kingdoms or perceive any remarkable accomplishments in the south Norman rulers. There was no existing tradition in the kingdom itself for praising the Norman achievement; nor was admiration of the Normans originally any part of general perceptions about the medieval past of Europe.

To explain how this came about it is necessary to go back to the eighteenth century when it first became possible for historians internationally to make use of the great published collections of original sources. A hundred years before Hare, Gibbon summed up his view of the Normans.¹¹ He had read the sources, but they gave him no favourable impression of their deeds. 'My long-accustomed reader, he says, will give me credit for saying that I myself have ascended to the fountain head, as often as such ascent could be either profitable or possible, and that I have diligently turned over the originals in the first volumes of Muratori.' Gibbon's sources were mainly narrative, rather than documentary, as modern scholars would require, but in this he does not differ from Hare, whose account was also ultimately dependent on similar evidence. Their interpretations differ because Gibbon was no admirer of Roger II. 'Had he been content', he wrote, 'with his fruitful patrimony, a happy and a grateful people might have blessed their benefactor; and if a wise administration could have restored the prosperous time of the Greek colonies, the opulence and power of Sicily alone might have equalled the widest scope that could be acquired and desolated by the sword of war. But the ambition of the great count was ignorant of all these noble pursuits; it was gratified by the vulgar means of violence and artifice ... after the loss of her dukes Apulia was chained as a servile appendage to the crown of Sicily ... the founder of the monarchy ruled by the sword and his death abated the fear without healing the discontent of his subjects.' Gibbon was equally critical of Roger's successors. He regarded the Muslims as having excessive influence. He did not consider this as evidence of Norman toleration, but as a source of corruption. 'Sicily had imbibed a deep tincture of Oriental manners ... the despotism, the pomp and even the harem of a sultan, and a Christian people was oppressed and insulted by the ascendant of the eunuchs who openly professed or secretly cherished the religion of Mohammed.' The single sentence he wrote about the blessedness of the reign of William II rests on the eulogy of that ruler given by the chronicler Richard of San Germano (in what is now known to be the second version of his chronicle written in the 1230s). It does not indicate any awareness on Gibbon's part of how William II or other Norman rulers actually governed.

Gibbon's passage on Apulia as a servile appendage to Sicily suggests that he did not regard the Normans as creating a single state but as cobbling together two distinctive regions, which for most of their history had gone their separate ways. Here we touch a raw nerve

of southern sensibilities in dealing with the kingdom. The English have no reservations about approving a Norman conquest that helped to unite England. But south Italians and Sicilians are not agreed at all about the advantages brought to their lands by a single Norman state for them both. After the Sicilian Vespers in 1282, the old Norman kingdom was split in two. Sicily was ruled by kings from the house of Aragon and then by Spain for most of the next six hundred years. The mainland was ruled by kings of the house of Anjou for a hundred and fifty years and then also by kings from Spain. Even under their Spanish kings the island and mainland were not reunited, since separate viceroys were appointed in Naples and Palermo. The two kingdoms thus remained separate until 1743 when they were both ruled by the Spanish Bourbons. There was, however, no feeling that they had both returned to their original 'Norman' home. Sicily, in particular, deeply resented a government operating not in Palermo but on the mainland at Caserta, near Naples. For both parts of the state, the Norman past had been a very brief episode in their whole histories and it had not left lasting marks or inspired respect. Pietro Giannone, author of the famous secular history of the Neapolitan kingdom published in 1723 which Gibbon had used, took the trouble to use archive materials not already published for his account of Norman institutions. He argued that since even under the Normans the mainland had had its own laws and judicial system, it had in fact been a separate kingdom even in those days, so that Sicilian claims that the government of the whole kingdom had once been conducted from Palermo were erroneous.¹² The study of the Norman kingdom in eighteenth-century Italy was contentious and indeed conducted on occasion for polemical purposes. In these days of largely academic history, it is easy to forget that earlier historical passions had practical implications for authors and readers. For his anticlericalism Giannone himself was driven into twelve years of exile and this was followed by thirteen even more dreadful years which he spent in prison, where he was in effect murdered.

The French Revolution, then French invasion of Italy and occupation of the kingdom of Naples, had serious implications for the future of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The royal family had to take refuge in Sicily itself where it was protected by the British who confronted the French across the straits of Messina. Not only were the Sicilians at this point delivered from Neapolitan domination; they were encouraged by the British presence to press for the restoration of

what they regarded as their traditional constitution. They even devised a new one in 1812, modelled on that of Britain itself. To these same years belongs the publication of the pioneering history of Sicilian government, written by Rosario Gregorio, which gave an account of institutions based on original documents.¹³ Gregorio was very erudite, and learnt Arabic to improve his understanding of early Sicilian history. He became historiographer royal and professor of history at Palermo. Because the continuous records of government began in the fourteenth century, he was originally concerned with the Aragonese period, when the traditional Sicilian constitution had taken shape. But he pushed back his enquiries into the Norman period and was prepared to consider whether Roger II's monarchy had been founded on the basis of even earlier regimes, Byzantine and Muslim. He rejected the idea. Roger II, like any other enlightened ruler, had devised his own monarchy. Given the times in which Gregorio wrote, it is hardly surprising if he made much of the Normans' links with England. He went so far as to think that Roger II deliberately adopted some of William the Conqueror's own innovations in England for his new royal government in Sicily. Although this idea now seems rather quaint, Gregorio naturally thought that the governments of the middle ages were devised and imposed by their rulers, as they were in the Europe of the enlightenment. If Sicilians could think of adopting the British constitution for themselves in 1812, there was no obvious incongruity about the Normans of Sicily having done something similar seven hundred years earlier. Gregorio's very influential book, published immediately after his death in 1809, provided the backbone of Sicilian medieval studies throughout the nineteenth century. Some of the documents he used are still normally cited from his footnotes, either because the originals have since been lost or because the texts have not been reprinted. Gally Knight naturally made use of Gregorio's work and by this means some of Gregorio's ideas became familiar to some English readers too.

Lord William Bentinck, who was a kind of British military dictator in Sicily during the last years of the Napoleonic wars, actually wrote in 1813 that he hoped Sicily would become 'the queen of our colonies'. For many years thereafter, the British continued to think that they had some sort of public moral obligation to help the Sicilians attain their objective of restoring their own constitution.¹⁴ In practice, this amounted to little because the British government was obliged in 1815 to restore the Bourbons to their united kingdom of the

Two Sicilies, as part of the general European settlement, but public opinion in Britain was not reassured.¹⁵ The repressive character of the Bourbon monarchy made it deeply hostile to every expression of Sicilian dissent. This was, moreover, very lively amongst the population of the island, for the excitement of the years of constitutional discussions and the subsequent repression had engendered passionate feelings which drove Sicilians from optimism to despair. This lasted over forty years. Only the eventual acceptance of rule by the royal house of Piedmont in 1860 re-established something like political stability. Even so, Sicilians were rapidly disillusioned by the experience of being governed from even further away, and by such alien administrative methods. Sicilian historians accordingly tended to nurse their patriotism by a nostalgic regard for their great past. To this day Sicily remains dissatisfied with its relationship to the rest of Italy, despite the autonomous status it has enjoyed under the present Italian republic. Foreigners in particular need to bear in mind how differently Sicilians are bound to view their own remote past from the way even south Italians do. North Italians, who think of the south as an undifferentiated district of poverty, ignorance and superstition, ought to recognise that the force of regional patriotism is as strong in Sicily as in Turin, Milan and Venice.

The most important of Sicily's nineteenth-century historians after Gregorio was Michele Amari, in later life a Minister of Education in united Italy and a Senator of the kingdom. As a young man, however, Amari had been a passionate Sicilian patriot. His first important historical work, published in 1842, was on the Sicilian Vespers, which he interpreted, not in the traditional way as a conspiracy of nobles against the Angevin king Charles I, but as a popular revolt against the tyrannical government of Naples. However stupid the Bourbon authorities were, they had no difficulty about understanding the implications of such a historical work and Amari was obliged to go into exile to escape their clutches. In Paris, he was received as an international celebrity for his defence of liberty and resistance to oppressive government. While there he took up the study of Arabic and eventually became keeper of the Oriental books in the Bibliothèque Impériale. Here he began in 1854 to publish his most famous work, a history of the Muslims in Sicily.¹⁶ Amari had been from an early age a convinced critic of the church and its beliefs. It is easy to see why he should have been drawn to the study of that period of Sicily's history when the island had not been in thrall to the clergy.

For Amari, the Muslims represented the possibility of culture, learning and order that was in nineteenth-century terms secular, liberal and enlightened. His account of the Muslims concluded by showing how their influence survived beyond the Norman conquest to contribute to Norman building, learning and political management. He showed that the Normans at least appreciated the talents of the Muslims and how they could contribute to its culture. Frederick II had carried on this tradition. Only the papal imposition of the Angevins in 1266 had led to the final extinction of the Muslim communities in the kingdom. The Sicilians had promptly shown how much they abhorred French domination by massacring the French in the Sicilian Vespers. In Amari's interpretation, the Muslims were absorbed into the history of the island and ceased to be considered an anomaly, as enemies of Christian civilisation. Although Amari's great work has never been translated into English, or indeed into any foreign language, its influence has spread throughout European culture: a new dimension, not only to the history of Sicily but of the middle ages, was marked out. Given, however, the general character of modern European education, it has been a dimension which can still only be measured by the comparatively few scholars with adequate knowledge of Arabic. Most historians of medieval Sicily have become dependent on the work of Oriental scholars for the elucidation of certain issues, and few of them can now make direct contact with all the sources considered relevant.

Since Amari's day, there has developed another problem about familiarity with the sources themselves, namely the decline over the last century in the study of Greek. Those who consider themselves well-educated no longer regard a knowledge of Greek as indispensable. In Sicily and southern Italy when the Normans first arrived, many records were kept in Greek and earlier historians of the kingdom obviously had no difficulty in reading them. This is no longer true. Once again, historians of the Normans have become dependent on specialist scholars for the preparation, annotation and translation of such sources. Unfortunately, Hellenists interested in the Greek writings of the Italian provinces of the Byzantine empire necessarily bring to their work attitudes rather different from those of medieval historians raised in an exclusively Latin tradition. Classicists tend to be much more interested in philological problems or literary texts. They have, anyway, made no study of the *officialese* of royal charters, which still hampers appreciation of the Greek documents from the

Norman kingdom, since medieval historians cannot provide this kind of expertise for themselves. But some historians will quote glibly from Latin translations of such Greek documents apparently unaware of how dubious it is to argue from texts belonging to a different rhetorical tradition.¹⁷

Specialisation of scholarship is generally considered to mark a step forward in understanding but in this case, particularly given the great diversities of the southern population, the effect of so many specialists studying particular topics is to make it that much more difficult to assess not only the overall position but also the relative standings of the various groups. Moreover, because there is so little evidence for the kingdom as a whole, every scrap available has to be pressed to the last drop, with the result that historians have become somewhat bewildered as to how to proceed with evidence 'processed' by so many different specialists. The study of architecture, and especially of mosaic decoration, has become another specialist discipline in its own right, which historians of the kingdom cannot ignore but which they have some difficulty in assimilating. The very form in which much modern historical work on the Normans in Italy is published, namely collected conference papers, indicates what I mean. Here a dozen or more specialists deliver their own fascinating accounts of the topic in question from their own vantage points.¹⁸ Such collections do not even aim to integrate our understanding but to entertain us, as with a historical kaleidoscope. Had the Norman monarchy a hard core on to which other studies could be grafted, as happens in England, the specialist contributors might be seen as having enhanced our perceptions. In the south, the different disciplines lack this focus. This is further accentuated by the fact that since the early days of united Italy, regional history societies have been fostered all over the country to publish the original sources of their own part of Italy as well as learned studies. This means that important work on the Norman kingdom has been done by local historians with only very limited interests in the history of the whole kingdom, since their main concern was with their own particular region of it. Sicily, for example, now has three societies of this kind, based on Palermo, Messina and Catania and inevitably the study of the Norman kingdom has suffered. On the mainland, likewise, there are now separate historical societies for Naples, Apulia, Calabria, the Terra di Lavoro, Benevento and the Abruzzi. Historians are therefore encouraged in this

way to cultivate their interests in their own part of the country rather than in the institutions of the whole Norman kingdom.

This problem of modern study in Italy is compounded in the south by the phenomenon I have already alluded to: the importance of foreign contributions. In the nineteenth century in England too, Norman scholarship was still heavily indebted to French or German scholarship. Only in the present century has it been possible for students of Norman England to take almost no notice of continental contributions. The Norman academic industry has been anglicised. It is therefore quite a shock to find how much south Italian studies still owe to the many foreign scholars, in almost all aspects of the subject. The Germans and French, in particular, can count on better resources in libraries and subventions for publication or periods of long study not available to Italians themselves. There may be other factors at work. Take, for example, the new edition of the Latin diplomas of the Norman kings, which has at last started to appear in print, prepared for publication by German scholars.¹⁹ The annotation, which is naturally very extensive, is also in German. This is hardly the best way to make these important texts, which are central to the history of the monarchy, much more widely understood in Italy itself, even if Italian scholars themselves still take it for granted that educated persons can read all the major western languages. There is more to the problem than the matter of language. Relevant publications on the monarchy are made in so many different periodicals in and out of Italy, that there are real difficulties about knowing what has been published, even before sitting down to read it. There is said to be an intense Japanese interest in the Norman kingdom, of which only a tiny proportion is accessible in English,²⁰ so that I express no opinion of its quality or its conclusions. It serves only to underline how scattered learning about the Norman kingdom has become. Compare the situation in England, where it would be possible to study the changes in Norman scholarship by concentrated reading of the *English Historical Review*.

The main foreign contributions to Norman studies have been made by the French, the Germans and the English-speaking historians. The French and Germans were obviously drawn originally to these studies mainly through what was perceived as points of contact with the histories of their own countries. The numerous French interventions in Italian affairs (if not from the Gallic Brennus in 390 B.C., at least since Charlemagne) could be made to justify French study of almost any period of Italian history. The most comprehensive of all modern

studies of the kingdom by a single author is still that written in French (1907) by Frédéric Chalandon, then a young man of 32, who went on to study the Comneni at Constantinople.²¹ He was from Lyon, not Normandy, and he openly offered his work to the French public in a patriotic spirit, saying of the Norman conquest of Italy and Sicily and the creation of the kingdom, that it provided a curious chapter of the eleventh and twelfth-century history of the French nobility outside France. He was frankly not interested in it as part of Norman history but for its place in the general history of the French *d'outre-mer*. Three years earlier, Erich Caspar, at the even earlier age of 25, published his great monograph on Roger II in German.²² This is also still a standard work. He built upon important studies made amongst others, by German scholars who had been making valuable contributions to the history of the kingdom in the late nineteenth century. But it was really from the end of the century that the Germans concentrated their attention on the topic. The Prussian Historical Institute in Rome, founded in 1888, proved very important as a scholarly base for Germans in Italy, particularly in taking advantage of the permission to use the Vatican archives granted by Leo XIII in 1881. This made possible the research programme which eventually produced Paul Kehr's *Italia Pontificia* from 1906 and it prompted the search for new documentary material in all the southern archives. Kehr's younger brother Karl Andreas published, also young, in 1902, the first study of the diplomatic of Norman documents in the tradition of Bresslau's *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre*.²³ Since Burckhardt's declaration in 1860 that Frederick II had ruled the first modern state, Germans had taken a new interest in the last great medieval emperor. They were fascinated by his concepts of power and how he had used it, above all in Italy. Caspar's study of Roger is subtitled 'the foundation of the Norman-Sicilian monarchy'. It is essentially concerned to show Roger as a political statesman - a kind of medieval Bismarck. The parallel studies German scholars under Kehr conducted on the papacy gave them a special interest in the nature of the ties of vassalage or dependence by the kingdom on the twelfth-century popes. More important still, it established a still continuing tradition of German scholarship on the kingdom which is firmly rooted in Italy itself.

This brings me to the contribution made by writers in English. Using Chalandon and Caspar, Edmund Curtis produced in 1912 the first extensive account of the Normans in English written in the series 'Heroes of the Nations' under the title 'Roger II'.²⁴ This made known in

England what had been published elsewhere, but in the previous year, C.H. Haskins broke new ground by publishing a very influential article in the *English Historical Review* on relations between England and Sicily in the twelfth century.²⁵ Haskins is probably best known in this connection for his work on the transmission of scientific learning to the west from Arabic sources accessible in Sicily. But his article was mainly concerned with the comparative history of institutions in the two kingdoms, pointing out similarities in the chancery, judicial, fiscal and feudal arrangements. Haskins was well aware that a lot of scholarly work had still to be done in the south and that modifications of his views would probably be necessary when all the sources had been adequately edited and studied. He admitted that he could not make adequate allowance for the effects of earlier arrangements on the royal institutions of Sicily. In the meantime he thought it valid to point out such similarities as seemed to identify what was specifically Norman about these institutions, which were in fact his major interest. But the effect of Haskins' work, not only in England, but also in Italy, was to persuade historians that the two Norman kingdoms did actually share certain basic characteristics. Since there was then more delay in the publication of other records than Haskins anticipated, later historians were, in many respects, induced to accept Haskins' provisional conclusions as definitive. Moreover in 1912 when Miss Jamison published her chapters on the administrative history of the Norman kingdom,²⁶ she made another vital contribution in English to the history of the southern kingdom. In the process she transferred to the south the idea of military constabularies which J.H. Round had tried to develop in England. Although this theory has sunk without trace in England, in Italy it is still going strong. Miss Jamison did not change her views over the years and, before her death in 1972 at the age of 95, prepared for publication a new edition of the enquiry into military service known as the *Catalogus Baronum* which she regarded as adequate evidence to support her theory.²⁷ The annotation to this text was published as recently as 1984 by Professor Cuozzo, who still takes her theory for proven. The comparative history of Norman institutions in the two kingdoms has not been of much concern to either French or German scholars, but this aspect has mesmerized historians writing in English.

Its first emphatic presentation seems to be in lectures on the Normans in European history which Haskins delivered in 1915.²⁸ Here he not only insisted on the two Norman kingdoms as standing well in

advance of contemporaries in 'all that goes to make a modern type of government', but was even prepared to go further, stating that 'the Anglo-Norman kingdom of the north was actually inferior to the southern in financial resources and had made far less advance in the development of the class of trained officials, through whom the progress of European administration was to be realised'. Judged therefore by these tests, he said, 'it is not too much to call the kingdom of Roger II, rather than that of his grandson Frederick II, the first modern state'. It was from Haskins, that the Italian legal historian Antonio Marongiu borrowed the idea, and his theory that the kingdom was a twelfth-century 'model state' has been much discussed and is widely accepted in Italy.²⁹ Haskins' interpretation of the kingdom depended, however, not only on what he believed about the state of its government, but also on its cultural diversities and its contribution to European intellectual development. 'Twice', he wrote, 'has this vivid land of the south played a leading part in the world's life and thought - once under the Greeks - and a second time under the Norman princes and their Hohenstaufen successors, creators of an extraordinary vigorous and precocious state and a brilliant cosmopolitan culture. In area about four-fifths the size of England, the southern kingdom showed far greater diversity both in the land and its inhabitants. The difficulties of geography were increased by differences of race, religion and political traditions. The union of these conflicting elements into a single strong state was the test and triumph of Norman statesmanship. The policy of toleration in political and religious matters was first fully and systematically carried out by Roger II'. With Haskins, an American, there may be a hint here of the virtues of the modern secular state as a melting pot, the better off for its diversities, but for the English I hazard another explanation. This vision of the masterful Norman race scattering across Europe and carrying with them the gifts of administrative competence, and an assured tolerance of the many talents of their diverse subjects, struck a certain kind of Englishmen as being totally convincing. Aren't these Normans the prototypes of Anglo-Saxon imperialism, as it perceived itself in the early twentieth century? As Miss Jamison herself told the British Academy in 1938. 'the kinship of Normans all the world over [in the twelfth century] is accepted in the same sense that the kinship of British people is thought of in the Empire today, as an underlying, ever-present fact, but without making a song about it'.³⁰ It would be going too far to suppose that British scholars of the medieval kingdom consider that

they are studying a former part of the empire, but it is undeniable that English historians have, since early in this century, frequently felt attracted to the Normans of the south as to kinsmen of 'our' Normans too.

It can be no part of this paper to try and account for the contemporary state of scholarship about the kingdom. Here I have tried instead only to identify what seem the main forces that have brought appreciation of the twelfth-century kingdom to the fore during the last hundred years. Just as ideas about the monarchy have changed remarkably in the period considered, so it must be expected that recent orthodoxies will also be modified or overthrown. There are some signs already of dissatisfaction with older interpretations, though no new doctrine. Rather than deal with these in detail, let me allude to what seems the most basic issue: the need for historians to justify their opinions by exact reference to the original sources, and not selectively, but by honest confrontation of all the possible evidence. These sources act as a straight jacket to constrain the fooleries of historical madmen. Such changes as will be made to our understanding of the kingdom will come from a closer reading of all the sources we have. But it is also necessary to realise that there is a lot of evidence missing, either because it is lost or indeed because only a small part of the historical life of any period leaves any kind of historical record at all. For this reason too the historian has to be prepared to admit that there are real limits to what can be confidently affirmed and that some important matters must elude our understanding. There has not been as much historical scepticism with regard to the Norman kingdom as the state of the evidence warrants.

In the first place, consider the situation in England. There are for example 3,000 royal *acta* for the four Norman kings, William I, II, Henry I and Stephen. For the four Norman kings of Sicily, Roger, Williams I and II and Tancred there are about 400.³¹ Even with all the royal *acta* for England, with Domesday Book, the Great Roll of the Exchequer of 1130 and much architectural evidence, historians can still be in legitimate doubt about the effectiveness of Norman government in England, its relation to the Old English past, and the nature of its social and military revolution. The narrative sources are all available in recent editions, none anyway more than a hundred years old. There are few documents of the period that remain unprinted. Now contrast the position in the south. Two of the narrative sources for Roger II have still to be read in the 1845 reprint of eighteenth-century

editions.³² There is still no edition of the *acta* of Williams I and II, nor of the Greek documents of Roger II, many of which only survive anyway in curious Latin translations made in the middle ages. The basic list of Sicilian royal *acta* is still that made by Behring in the 1880s and published at Elbing (now Elblag) and apparently unobtainable anywhere in Britain.³³ There is no reliable guide to the documents of the Lombard or Norman rulers in the south before the monarchy, except for the Norman principality of Capua.³⁴ The published documents for Cassino³⁵ and San Stefano del Bosco³⁶ have to be read in eighteenth century versions; for Catania in a seventeenth-century volume.³⁷ The printed Norman documents for the Apulian towns form the most important collection of accessible private deeds.³⁸ For the three surviving monastic archives, there is actually for Montevergine a printed catalogue,³⁹ but for La Cava, the thousands of relevant documents are less easily known from a type-written catalogue.⁴⁰ There, and indeed at Cassino,⁴¹ the many documents are still relatively unknown and unpublished. In fact only a handful of institutions from the whole kingdom have left documents enough to provide the basis of historical knowledge: it is odd that the fullest archives have received the least attention. Is it ever going to be possible to generalise about the kingdom, or about the monarchy at its heart, when the deficiency of the central archive itself rules out the possibility of giving any demonstration of its effectiveness?

This raises a second point. Because of the partial character of the records and the limited exploitation of them, it is very surprising how confidently historians have been telling us what an extraordinarily wonderful monarchy it was: a model-state, without rival (except puzzling England), an efficient bureaucracy, a real social mix and the tolerance of all religions into the bargain. The claims for the kingdom can still be made in extravagant terms but could surely only command respect if they could be backed by unchallengeable evidence. This is simply not available in adequate quantity. Given what evidence there is about English royal finances in the twelfth-century, from the pipe rolls and the Dialogue of the Exchequer, it is galling to admit that we still cannot say much about the overall balances, their adequacy for royal ambitions, their relative standing with regard to France.⁴² About Sicilian finances, we have by contrast the merest scraps of evidence, certainly inadequate to affirm that the king of Sicily was the richest ruler of the day or how his financial office functioned. But why therefore have historians as sober as Haskins been prepared to make

such extravagant claims, and above all why has there been so much willingness to believe in the exceptional quality of the kingdom built by Roger II? Even Abulafia, who ventured to doubt whether royal orders really could penetrate deeply into the provinces, magnified the power of the royal bureaucracy to bleed the country dry, if only to make his account of its iniquities seem more impressive.⁴³ It is as though there was a general will to believe in the kingdom, and a curious unwillingness to insist on getting it proved first, just in case perhaps it began to look less impressive under the microscope. The mosaics of Palermo, Cefaló and Monreale are sometimes treated as though on their own they are sufficient to silence any doubts by their magnificence. But English historians have never needed to argue about English kings who built Westminster, Battle, Reading and Faversham abbeys as monuments to their piety, as though the monuments ought to be read as historical evidence about royal authority. Ralph Davis in his book on the Normans and their Myth suggested that the Normans themselves were great publicists for their successes and their masterfulness.⁴⁴ But is it not modern historians who have for various reasons of their own chosen to make heroes of the Normans? In Gibbon's day they had no glamour. Can it be perhaps, that from several different points of view, Norman Sicily is perceived as a kind of realisation of certain modern ideals: the secular state, religious tolerance, racial harmony and, of course, administrative competence, the smooth working of the government machine tended by men of talents from every part of the community? In the twelfth-century we know that Roger II was highly unpopular with the many he had worsted, like the pope, or the eastern and western emperors. These can be regarded as 'outsiders', like John of Salisbury himself, who thought Roger's high-handed treatment of the church intolerable.⁴⁵ We know of no one who in his lifetime regarded Roger as a model, not even of clever state-craft though the author of the *Liber de Regno* wrote of his authority in the state with respect.⁴⁶ But if he has become in the twentieth century one of the 'heroes of the nations', it is modern historians who have made him into this. It is our own judgment on him that we need to examine with some care. How much have we been trying to read into Roger's achievements for purposes of our own?

NOTES

- ¹ D. Abulafia, *Frederick II. A Medieval Emperor* (London 1988). For Norman ideas, see p. 62; for absolutist ideas, pp. 13-14.
- ² W.E. Gladstone, First Letter to the Earl of Aberdeen on the state prosecution of the Neapolitan Government, 7 April 1851, Reprinted in *Gleanings of Past Years 1851-77*, Vol. IV (London 1879) para 7, pp. 5-6.
- ³ For later writing in English on the history of the kingdom, there is notably; S. Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers* (Cambridge 1958); D. Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily and Modern Sicily after 1713* (London 1968); A. Ryder, *The Kingdom of Naples under Alfonso the Magnanimous; The Making of a Modern State* (Oxford 1976); H.G. Koenigsberger, *The Practice of Empire (The Government of Sicily under Philip II of Spain)* (Cornell 1969); H. Acton, *The Bourbons of Naples 1743-1825* (London 1956).
- ⁴ F. Ughelli, *Italia Sacra*, 2nd ed. N. Coleti (10 vols, Venice 1717-22), R. Pirri, *Sicilia Sacra*, 3rd ed. A. Mongitore and V.M. Amico (2 vols, Palermo 1733), L.A. Muratori, *Rerum Scriptores Italianarum* (25 vols, Milan 1723-51).
- ⁵ For interest in classical sites see the standard reference work of J.C. Eustace, *A Classical Tour through Italy*, based on his tour of 1802 (3rd edition London 1815). Eustace travelled no further south than Paestum; H. Swinburne, *Travels in the Two Sicilies in the years 1777, 1778, 1779 and 1780* (London 1783) gives a much fuller and appreciative account of the south.
- ⁶ For conditions of travelling in Sicily in the mid-eighteenth century see Baron Riedesel's account of his journey of 1767 written in the form of letters to the scholar J.J. Winckelmann; Baron Riedesel, *Travel through Sicily and that part of Italy formerly called Magna Graecia*, translated by J.R. Forster (London 1773); for Palermo p. 4; for Monreale p. 7.
- ⁷ *An exact description of the Island and Kingdom of Sicily*, translated from the French of D.T.V.Y. by D. Macnab (Falkirk 1784). This was apparently written many years before; see p. 19 for the potted history and p. 32 on Monreale.
- ⁸ H. Gally Knight, *The Normans in Sicily being a sequel to An Architectural Tour in Normandy* (London 1838).
- ⁹ *Pictures from Sicily by the Author of Forty Days in the Desert* (London 1853); for Monreale see p. 178.
- ¹⁰ A.J.C. Hare, *Cities of Southern Italy and Sicily* (London 1883), chapter XI, pp. 374-378.
- ¹¹ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter LVI.
- ¹² P. Giannone, *Istoria Civile del Regno di Napoli*, Libro Undecimo, capo IV (Milan edition vol. IV 1823 pp. 263, 268). This was first published Naples 1723.

- ¹³ Rosario Gregorio, *Considerazioni sopra la Storia di Sicilia di tempi Normanni sino ai presenti* (6 vols, Palermo, 1805-16).
- ¹⁴ J. Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck, The Making of a Liberal Imperialist 1774-1839* (London 1974, Part II), chapters 4 and 5.
- ¹⁵ R.K. Craven, *A Tour through the southern provinces of the kingdom of Naples* (London 1821) refers to the many books available to his contemporaries about Sicilian affairs. For an impression of how Sicily struck English visitors in 1812-13 see T.S. Hughes *Travels in Greece and Albania* (2nd edition, London 1830).
- ¹⁶ M. Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (3 vols., Florence 1854-1872, now usually read in the second edition revised by G. Levi delle VIDA and C.A. Nallino, Catania 1930-1938).
- ¹⁷ For example, W. Ullmann, *Jurisprudence in the Middle Ages, V. Roman Public Law and Medieval Monarchy. Norman Rulership in Sicily*, pp. 157-184, seems to base most of his argument on the phrasing of Latin translations from the Greek, where they cannot bear the weight he puts on them.
- ¹⁸ There are many notable collections of conference papers. The most coherent sequence has been provided by the conferences organised at the Centro di Studi Normann-Svevi in the University of Bari, which has been holding them biennially since 1973.
- ¹⁹ The Latin diplomas of the Norman kings have now started to appear with the general title *Codex Diplomaticus Regni Siciliae* Series I under the auspices of Palermo Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts. All the editors are German and the volumes are published at Cologne.
- ²⁰ The best known examples of Japanese scholarship on the kingdom are the papers of H. Takayama, 'The Financial and Administrative Organisation of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily', *Viator* 16 (1985), p.129-155 and 'Familiars Regis and the Royal Inner Council in twelfth-century Sicily', *English Historical Review* 104 (1989), pp. 357-72.
- ²¹ F. Chalandon, *Histoire de la domination normande en Italie et en Sicile* (2 vols., Paris 1907).
- ²² E. Caspar, *Roger II 1101-54 und die Gründung der normannisch-sicilischen Monarchie* (Innsbruck 1904).
- ²³ K.A. Kehr, *Die Urkunden der normannisch-sicilischen Könige. Eine diplomatische Untersuchung* (Innsbruck 1902).
- ²⁴ E. Curtis, *Roger of Sicily and the Normans in Lower Italy 1016-1154* (New York and London 1912).
- ²⁵ C.H. Haskins, 'England and Sicily in the twelfth century', *English Historical Review* 26 (1911), pp. 433-47, 641-65.
- ²⁶ E. Jamison, 'The Norman Administration of Apulia and Capua', *British School of Rome Papers* Vol. VI (1913), reprint ed. D. Clementi and T. Kölzer (Aalen 1987).

- 27 *Catalogus Baronum*, ed. E. Jamison, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* (Rome 1972); *Catalogus Baronum. Commentario*, ed. E. Cuozzo. *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* (Rome 1984), and see E. Cuozzo, *Quei Maledetti Normanni Cavalieri e organizzazione militare nel Mezzogiorno Normanno* (Naples 1989).
- 28 C.H. Haskins, *The Normans in European History* (New York 1915, repr. 1966).
- 29 A. Marongiu, 'A Model State in the Middle Ages: the Norman Kingdom of Sicily', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* VI (1964), pp. 307-20.
- 30 E. Jamison, 'The Sicilian Norman Kingdom in the mind of Anglo-Norman Contemporaries', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 24 (1938), p. 42.
- 31 The estimate is derived from C.R. Brühl, *Urkunden und Kanzlei Rogers II von Sizilien* (Cologne 1978,) and on the works of Behring and Enzensberger cited below, in note 33.
- 32 G. Del Re, *Cronisti e scrittori sincroni napoletani editi e inediti*, (Naples 1845), *Storia della Monarchia* Vol. I, Normanni.
- 33 W. Behring *Sicilianische Studien I. Die Anfänge des Königreiches, Die Regesten König Rogers, Programm des königlich Gymnasiums zu Elbing 1882*, pp. 1-30. H. Enzensberger, *Beiträge zum Kanzlei- und Urkundenwesen der Normannischen Herrscher Unter Italiens and Siziliens* (Kallmünz 1971), still refers to Behring's catalogue.
- 34 For Capua G. Loud has provided 'A Calendar of the diplomas of the Norman Princes of Capua', *British School at Rome Papers* XLIX (1981), pp.99-143.
- 35 For Cassino, E. Gattola's *Historia Abbatiae Cassinensis* (Venice 1733), and *Ad historiam Abbatiae Cassinensis accessiones* (Venice 1734).
- 36 B. Tromby, *Storia critico-cronologica diplomatica del patriarca S Brunone e del suo Ordine Cartusiano* (10 vols, Naples 1773-79).
- 37 G.B. De Grossis, *Catania Sacra*, Catania 1654.
- 38 *Codice Diplomatico Barese* (Bari 1897-).
- 39 G. Mongello, *Regesto delle Pergame* (Vol. I, Rome 1956), over a thousand documents older than 1200.
- 40 *Codex Diplomaticus Cavensis* (8 vols, 1862-1893) reach only 1064. After that there is an unpublished type-written catalogue in the abbey.
- 41 For Cassino see T. Leccisotti, *I Registri dell'Archivio* (Abbazia di Monte Cassino) Rome. *Pubblicazioni degli archivi di stato*. no. 54, 56, 58 etc. (1964-).
- 42 For disputes about the relative strengths of English and French royal finances in the twelfth century see J.C. Holt, 'The loss of Normandy and Royal Finances' in *War and Government in the Middle Ages. Essays in*

honour of J.O. Prestwich, ed J. Gillingham and J.C. Holt (Cambridge 1984), pp. 92-105.

⁴³ Abulafia, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ R.H.C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London 1976).

⁴⁵ John of Salisbury, *Historia Pontificalis*, ed. M. Chibnall. H. Wieruszowski, 'Roger II of Sicily. Rex-Tyrannus in twelfth-century political thought', *Speculum*, 38 (1963), pp. 46-78.

⁴⁶ G.B. Siracusa, *La Historia o Liber de Regno Sicilie* (Rome 1897), *Fonti per la storia d'Italia*, p.6. The anonymous author refers to the fact that many of Roger II's actions were attributed to his 'tyranny', but himself judges that Roger's cruelties were necessary to repress rebellion and treachery. But his personal opinion seems to be set against a more common judgment hostile to Roger. It does not amount to evidence that Roger had become a model ruler by the second half of the twelfth century.